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ABSTRACT

Although many children change schools during the course of a school year, itinerant fruit pickers' children in Australia often move residences as well as schools on a regular basis, generally attending at least two schools per year. Although research has argued that time missed at school and change of schools is often disruptive to children's literacy learning, educational itinerancy has not been widely researched. Some studies have attempted to measure the literacy performance of itinerant children against their sedentary counterparts, but little research has attempted to identify how itinerant children are constructed as literacy learners. This paper draws on the initial data collected as part of a 3 year study into the social construction of literacy and itinerant fruit pickers' children. Focusing on children who travel between North Queensland and Victoria or southern New South Wales, while their parents pick vegetables in the north during winter and fruit or vegetables in the south during summer, the study is investigating the literacy learning of a group of children who move backwards and forwards between two states, two educational systems and two schools. This paper will show the influence of social and cultural contexts on the construction of the children as literacy learners. Using Fairclough's (1989) context-interaction-text model as a framework for analyzing interview data, the paper will examine one institutional context and the associated broader community context into which the children move. This will allow the exploration of equity issues that emanate from existing literacy policies and institutional practices, as well as the relationship between contextual factors and talk about the itinerant children. (Contains 14 references.) (Author/RS)

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MOVING INTO A NEW COMMUNITY: ITINERANT FRUIT PICKERS' CHILDREN AND LITERACY LEARNING

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Paper presented at the Joint National Conference of the Australian Association for the Teaching of English and the Australian Literacy Educators' Association
(Hobart Tasmania Australia, 12-15 July 2001).

ABSTRACT

Although many children change schools during the course of a school year, itinerant fruit pickers' children in Australia often move residences as well as schools on a regular basis, generally attending at least two schools per year. Although research has argued that time missed at school and change of schools is often disruptive to children's literacy learning, educational itinerancy has not been widely researched. Some studies have attempted to measure the literacy performance of itinerant children against their sedentary counterparts, but little research has attempted to identify how itinerant children are constructed as literacy learners. This paper draws on the initial data collected as part of a three year study into the social construction of literacy and itinerant fruit pickers' children. Focusing on children who travel between North Queensland and Victoria or southern New South Wales, while their parents pick vegetables in the north during winter and fruit or vegetables in the south during summer, the study is investigating the literacy learning of a group of children who move backwards and forwards between two states, two educational systems and two schools. This paper will show the influence of social and cultural contexts on the construction of the children as literacy learners. Using Fairclough's (1989) context-interaction-text model as a framework for analysing

interview data, the paper will examine one institutional context and the associated broader community context into which the children move. This will allow the exploration of equity issues that emanate from existing literacy policies and institutional practices, as well as the relationship between contextual factors and talk about the itinerant children.

KEY WORDS
Itinerancy, Equity, Research, Context

INTRODUCTION

Some children, especially those whose parents are itinerant workers who move from place to place in search of work opportunities, change schools on a seasonal basis, sometimes two, three or more times a year. Although educational itinerancy has not been widely researched, itinerancy is generally described in negative terms and perceived as having a negative impact on children and their school experiences. Research in Australia and the United States has argued that, for students, itinerancy results in disrupted social and academic development (Birch & Lally, 1994; Fields, 1995), low self-esteem, insecurity, irritability and poor peer relations (Audette, Algozzine, & Warden, 1993; Welch, 1987), lower achievement levels (Evans, 1996; Pribesh & Downey, 1999), grade retention (Rahmani, 1985), and high school dropout (Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Although such negative implications could perhaps suggest that schooling may not be socially just or equitable for itinerant children, most of the research has either focused on the effects of itinerancy on children's psychological, biological or academic development (as identified above) or implied that the families' choice of an itinerant lifestyle is at fault (e.g. Bracey, 1991). As a result, there has been a tendency, often implicit, to blame the

children or their parents for their itinerancy and for the negative impact on children's educational achievement.

However, current educational policy and strategy documents (e.g. Education Queensland, 1999; Ministerial Council on Education Employment Training and Youth Affairs, 1999; Queensland School Curriculum Council, 1999) call for teachers and schools to be socially just, to overcome barriers to access and participation, and to ensure that all students have access to learning opportunities and equitable learning outcomes. Teachers are encouraged to identify, acknowledge and accept children's diversity, especially in relation to their home backgrounds, instead of taking up deficit discourses. As Allen (2001) explains, teachers should be questioning "whether there is anyone in our schools and classrooms who is marginalised, whose voice cannot be heard, whose culture has to be left at the school gate" (p.150).

THE RESEARCH

During 2000, my research focused on four itinerant families who arrived in the North Queensland town of Harbourton (a pseudonym) for the winter harvesting season. I conducted semi-structured interviews with the children and their parents, as well as with the school principal, the children's teachers, and members of the community into which the families had moved. The children in these families were some of the 100 children who enrolled in Harbourton's schools during the harvest. For this particular group of children, moving schools also means moving home, moving states, and moving from one educational system to another. The children's school reports suggest that the children achieve across the full range of achievement levels, although literacy appears to be the

one area where the children's results tend to be at either a satisfactory or a lower level of achievement.

When arriving at their "new" school, the itinerant children and their families move into a range of new contexts. These include the broader community, where the family finds accommodation and farm work, and the institutional context of the school and the classroom. Drawing on Fairclough's (1989, 1995) critical approach to examining the relationship between context, interaction and text, I use interview data to discuss how this particular group of itinerant children and their families are constructed within the different layers of context into which they moved.

MOVING INTO A NEW COMMUNITY

In the broader community context of Harbourton, community members construct itinerant farm workers in several ways. On the one hand, some of the town's businesses link the arrival of itinerant workers to increased prosperity, seeing them as necessary for the economic survival of the town. As an employee of one of the banks explained, "There's no doubt that the economy of Harbourton depends heavily on those itinerants. And that is right across the whole spectrum, from caravan parks, supermarkets, etcetera, pubs, all that cheap sort of accommodation." Similar attitudes came from a post office representative who said that "they do buy a lot of phone products . . . The itinerant people have made this place work remarkably well for us" and a publican who explained that "We love them."

On the other hand, however, many members of the community link itinerant farm workers with increased crime, drug use, domestic violence and family problems in the

local area. A member of the police force explained that the arrival of pickers "increases the volume of stealings, drugs, and just normal arrests, street offences . . . just probably from an overindulgence of alcohol and drugs after working hours." Similar opinions have also been expressed about the home lives of farm workers. A local government representative, for example, explained that "obviously they have problems as far as, you know, domestic violence and that type of stuff, alcohol abuse and everything, that seems to relate more so if they're travelling around." A suspicion of travelling people seemed fairly common in the community. As pointed out by one of the real estate agents, "Nobody knows their background. When you live in a small town, you have a fair idea of who does what. But when you get these people in . . . they have such free entry to the place, but who's to judge."

ARRIVING AT A NEW SCHOOL

Although the apparent distrust that some community members had of fruit pickers did not seem as evident in the school setting, there did seem to be some negative attitudes towards the annual arrival of itinerant children. These attitudes manifested themselves in a number of forms, although the negativity was not always expressed towards the children or their families.

An unresponsive education system

Some of the negativity was directed towards the education system. The school's principal and teachers were of the belief that their school was not treated equitably by the education system. Historical data show that the school's enrolments fluctuate in line with

the annual harvesting season, as the school's population is always at its smallest in February, begins to increase around April or May as the harvesting season begins, and reaches its maximum size at the peak of the harvesting season in August or September. During this period, the school's population usually increases by around seven to ten per cent. The education system, however, bases schools' staffing allocations on an enrolment census that is conducted on the eighth day of the school year. Because the census is conducted in early February, whilst the itinerant farm workers' children are attending schools in other states, the annual mid-year arrival of itinerant children results in over-sized classes and increased workloads for teachers. Although the system responds reactively to increased enrolments in schools, the principal complained that the arrival of an additional teacher results in "a logistical nightmare when we get so many kids in that we have to rearrange classes to make more classes" and "when the numbers go down . . . it all starts again."

Resources have to stretch further

Whilst a lot of the negativity was aimed at what the teachers saw as an unresponsive system, teachers were also concerned that the arrival of additional students meant that resources were expected to be shared amongst a much larger group of students. The principal acknowledged that "There's always the thought of - Are they dragging money away from our twelve monthers? You know, like our kids that stay here all the time." Strangely enough, however, there seemed little evidence that itinerant children were using additional resources such as learning support time. Although the principal concluded that "there's always that thought, even though we don't. We always say, no,

they're kids at our school too," it seems that it might be very easy for school discourses to make a binary distinction between itinerant students and the rest of the school population.

EXPLANATIONS OF LITERACY DIFFICULTIES

Linking literacy achievement to home background

Some teachers suggested that the children's itinerant lifestyle impacted on their literacy achievement at school. For example, a teacher explained that there was probably a lack of books at home, "because they're itinerant, I imagine what they bring is what they can fit in the car." Similarly, other teachers commented that their job is made more difficult when children arrive at school without the necessary school books and/or equipment. Several of the teachers linked children's school success to parental characteristics, with comments such as "I think it depends on the parents." Another teacher commented that the "standard stereotype of the itinerant kid," which suggested that "they'd be used to living rough" and that their "showering habits may be rudimentary," had survived even though there was evidence that these were not accurate descriptions of itinerant families. Approximately 85 per cent of the itinerant children come from non-English speaking backgrounds and the principal commented that "When we talk of itinerants, I mean straight away I seem to think of ESL, a major problem." One teacher thought that the difficulties experienced by one child "might mean that his parents aren't helping him choose books in English," whilst another teacher argued that parents from non-English speaking backgrounds often do the wrong thing when they encourage the children to speak English at home. There also seemed to be some concern that increased social problems coincided with the itinerant children's arrival in the school. The principal

explained that "I don't want to stereotype itinerant pickers into a low socio-economic category where social problems seem to manifest, but we do seem to have more than our fair share of social problems." Nevertheless, he acknowledged that an increase in the number of students in a school is likely to cause "a change in dynamics" and that this did not necessarily have anything to do with the children's itinerant lifestyle.

The children's personal characteristics

Amongst teachers, however, talk about itinerant students and their literacy achievement was varied. Despite the diversity of opinions, teachers seemed to agree that literacy achievement was related to the children's personal characteristics. Two of the children were described by their teacher as being "nice kids, well-behaved," "quite smart in lots of ways," with "all the attributes that someone needs to learn. The children's under-achievement in literacy learning was seen as being within the normal range and required "continued effort" from the children themselves. A different teacher felt that some itinerant students "hide their abilities a little bit, particularly if they get the impression that by hiding the ability they'll get work that's slightly easier." The teacher gave the example of an itinerant student who did well on a national English test, even though the teacher "didn't think he was a particularly keen reader or student of literature." Another teacher focused on the way that itinerant children seem to be more independent and "are much more mature, socially much more mature as well" than the residentially-stable students. One of the itinerant children in her class was rated at a high level of achievement in literacy and the teacher described her as being "very conscientious and capable."

CHILDREN'S AND PARENTS' EXPLANATIONS

The children were very quick to point out that their movement from school to school made their schooling quite difficult, whilst their parents were concerned about continuity and the differences between state educational systems. The children explained that they often repeated work that they had already done in their previous school.

CONCLUSION

For itinerant farm workers' children, arrival in a new school involves entering a range of new social and cultural contexts. In Harbourton, where the annual arrival of farm workers and fruit pickers swells the town's population by about thirty per cent, the children move into a community that has mixed feelings about seasonal workers and their effects on the community. Many people regard itinerant workers negatively. The annual influx of children into the school is also regarded negatively by teachers, although they blame the education system for not maintaining appropriate staffing and resource levels. In explaining the literacy difficulties experienced by itinerant children, teachers tended to locate blame outside the school - with the system, the children and their parents. However, there is probably a need for schools to look at their practices and processes and to consider the equity implications that exist. The children indicated that the repetition of work was a problem and it is quite likely that they also missed out on large sections of curriculum. Whilst the school seemed to be working hard to cater for itinerant children's needs, a review of school processes in relation to systematic tracking and access to specialist support would appear necessary.

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